

The Lower Scioto Valley

from Chillicothe to Portsmouth

Follow the beautiful Scioto Valley south out of Chillicothe to Waverly, with its historic district and Emmitt House Restaurant, and to a string of mounds, geometric remains, and historic houses along Wakefield Mound Road south of Piketon. On the opposite side of the Scioto River, a few miles before Portsmouth, the irregular Tremper Mound lies on private land beneath the western bluff. The city of Portsmouth, with remains of a huge complex of earthworks, stands at the most dramatic river confluence in the region.

Going south out of Chillicothe, either take Route 23/104 through the hills, or follow Three Locks Road along the Scioto River as it flows south between the huge, steep bluffs of its Teays-Age (pre-glacial) valley. This route along the base of the western river bluffs is also following the old canal bed, visible in aerial photos as lines of trees, and occasionally on the ground as an extra-large ditch, most of the way to the Ohio River.



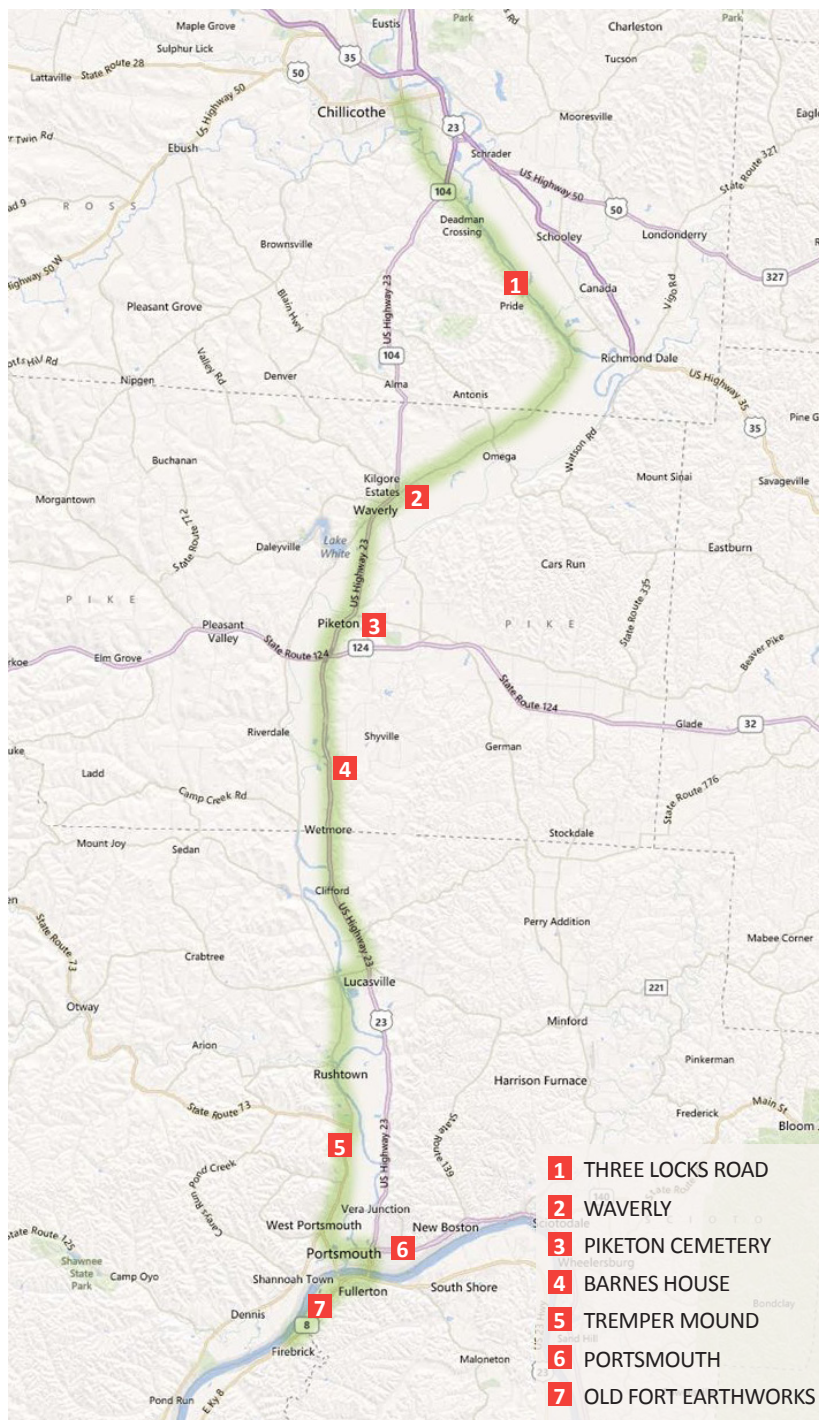
A cemetery south of Piketon preserves a complex, conjoined, Adena era mound; Teays River bluffs are visible in the distance.

MOUND CEMETERY

Take US 23 south out of Piketon and turn left onto State Route 32, then immediately left again into a dead end spur that reaches Mound Cemetery in Wakefield, with several Adena-era mounds.

A large, Adena-era conjoined mound stands in the center of the cemetery, topped by a flag and surrounded by graves both old and new. Early white settlers typically recognized the ancient mounds as sacred sites of burial, and one way of attempting respect, and ensuring preservation, was to plan new cemeteries around them. The large mound is linked to smaller segments by a large, unusual, undulating "apron" form.

One million years ago, the giant river valleys around this spot belonged to the pre-glacial Teays River. North America's largest river system used to flow northward here, before being gradually dammed up by the glaciers and then reversing course. Here at Piketon was a major confluence, a huge landmark on the continent's primordial surface. The valleys are still clearly visible as they converge on this spot: one now holding the south-flowing Scioto, the other, tiny "Big Beaver Creek."



BARNES OR "SEAL TOWNSHIP" EARTHWORKS

Continue south (from SR 32) on Wakefield Mound Road past several early nineteenth century houses, notably the Barnes House (3 miles south of the Route 32 intersection, on the left), where Abraham Lincoln stayed while visiting the impressive earthworks which stood directly across the road (now only traces). This square is the only one known to have aligned with the cardinal points, its gateways opening due north, south, east, and west. The site is now largely lost to gravel quarries.

This huge circle and square stood at the time on land owned by the prominent Barnes Family (hence the effort to re-name it the Barnes Works), who, obviously impressed with the earthworks, built their stately brick mansion exactly on the cross-axis of the ancient square.



The Barnes House reflects a Masonic-inspired pyramid-on-cube shape also commonly used for courthouses in the early 19th century.

THE BARNES HOUSE

The current owner of the Barnes Home, historian and writer Geoffrey Sea, talks about the Barnes family of Sargents / Piketon, and their importance among the leaders of Early Ohio.

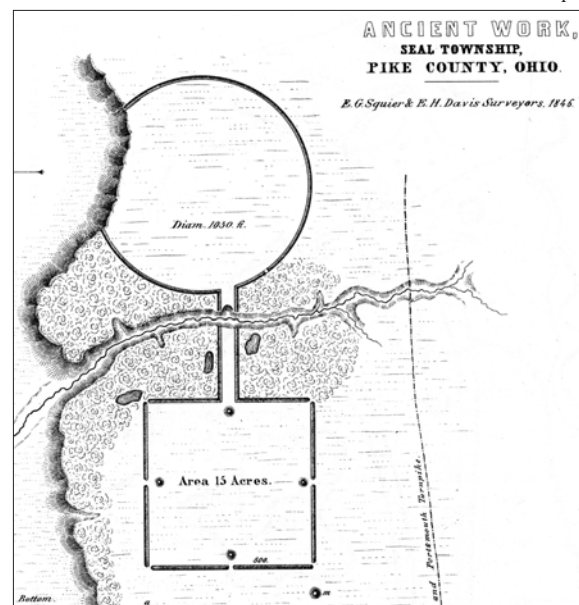
Joseph Barnes, back in Virginia, was a co-inventor of the steamboat and there was an enormous patent dispute, which they lost in the Virginia legislature. So he came to Ohio as a land of opportunity. They viewed it as a much more egalitarian society than had existed back in Virginia. And they were prominent Freemasons, which explains much about this house, its shape, and why it is located here.

They knew Washington, Jefferson. Jefferson worked with Barnes personally to revise the new patent law when he was Secretary of State under Washington. They built this house between 1803 (the year Ohio became a state) and 1805.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S VISIT

When he bought this house, Sea had heard of a visit there by Abraham Lincoln, but had to discover on his own the reason the then-congressman would have gone out of his way to come here:

In 1848, when he was ending his last term in congress, when he returned from Illinois to Washington, instead of taking the train, he took a steamboat up the Ohio River from St. Louis. It became very clear that the reason was that Squier and Davis had just published "Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley," which he read, and became fascinated with the different sites that they described. And if you look at his route, he would have had the opportunity to visit many of the sites described by Squier and Davis, including the Portsmouth works, and the works that were in front of this house. It was a little earthworks tour!



Squier and Davis drew the "Seal Township" Earthworks, a perfect circle plus the only major geometric earthwork (the square) aligned north-south.



Stuffed passenger pigeons still on display in their original case in the Barnes Home.

THE PIGEONS OF PIKETON

Geoffrey Sea recounts another historical event at this house: the famous "Sargents Pigeon", and what it was like to see the huge, sky-darkening clouds of these birds in pre-modern times, as they gathered and migrated along these huge Teays-age river valleys.

The very last passenger pigeon seen in the wild was seen by a young boy half a mile south of this house. He didn't know it was a passenger pigeon, they'd become very rare by the 1890s. He went and got a shotgun and shot the bird. It turns out that was the last passenger pigeon ever sighted. He brought the bird to this house and Blanche Barnes, the woman of the household at the time, was also a taxidermist.

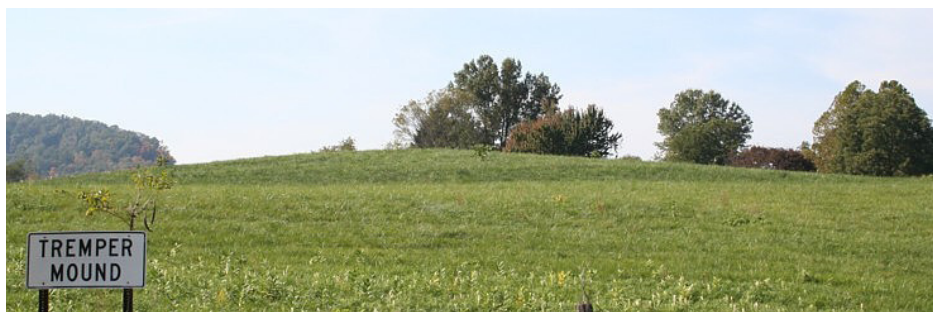
The bird was stuffed, and was then displayed in the Barnes Home for many years, and eventually donated to the Ohio Historical Society in Columbus. Passenger pigeons were very important to the ecology of Ancient North America, and were numerous beyond imagination.

Flocks were counted up to two billion birds in a single flock flying together. There's no other bird that congregates in those kind of numbers. It's almost unimaginable – the pre-eminent natural phenomenon of this region. They would blot out the sun; it was like experiencing an eclipse. It would have been one of those great markers of the seasons when the birds returned and left.

Sea has a theory that there were connections among these sky-darkening throngs of pigeons, traditional Native American beliefs, and the building of the geometric earthworks:

I believe that the big geometric earthworks were essentially built as a guide path for the pigeons. I have found a reference by Francis Parkman quoting one of the Jesuit missionaries in the early seventeenth century,

saying that the Hurons and affiliated tribes including the Ojibway, and also the Shawnee, believe that when we die we resurrect as passenger pigeons. They anticipated that they would have to travel to a place in the sky, and in order to get there would need guide paths. So they built these giant earthworks as symbols to guide them on that path.



Tremper Mound (largely reconstructed) lies in the middle of a field, visible from SR 104. (photo by Scenic Scioto Heritage)

THE TREMPER MOUND

Continuing south from Sargents, cross the river above Lucasville and follow SR 104 toward Portsmouth. Just past the intersection with SR 73, the Tremper Mound will appear in a slightly-rising field on the right (private land). Excavations beneath its irregular shape uncovered remains of a complex Hopewell-era mortuary building. Twelve basins were probably used for cremation. Remains from about 300 people were accumulated here.

Tremper is best known for its buried collection of 60 effigy smoking pipes, their bowls elegantly carved into the figures of Woodland animals, birds, and humans. Many of these pipes exactly match a collection found at Mound City, 40 miles upstream along the Scioto.

In the form of the pipes, we can recognize the faces and paws, the bills and wings of creatures common in Ohio Valley woods and meadows. Their stone bodies were beautifully formed and meticulously incised. But they were all ritually broken before being buried, to release or to cut their spiritual power.



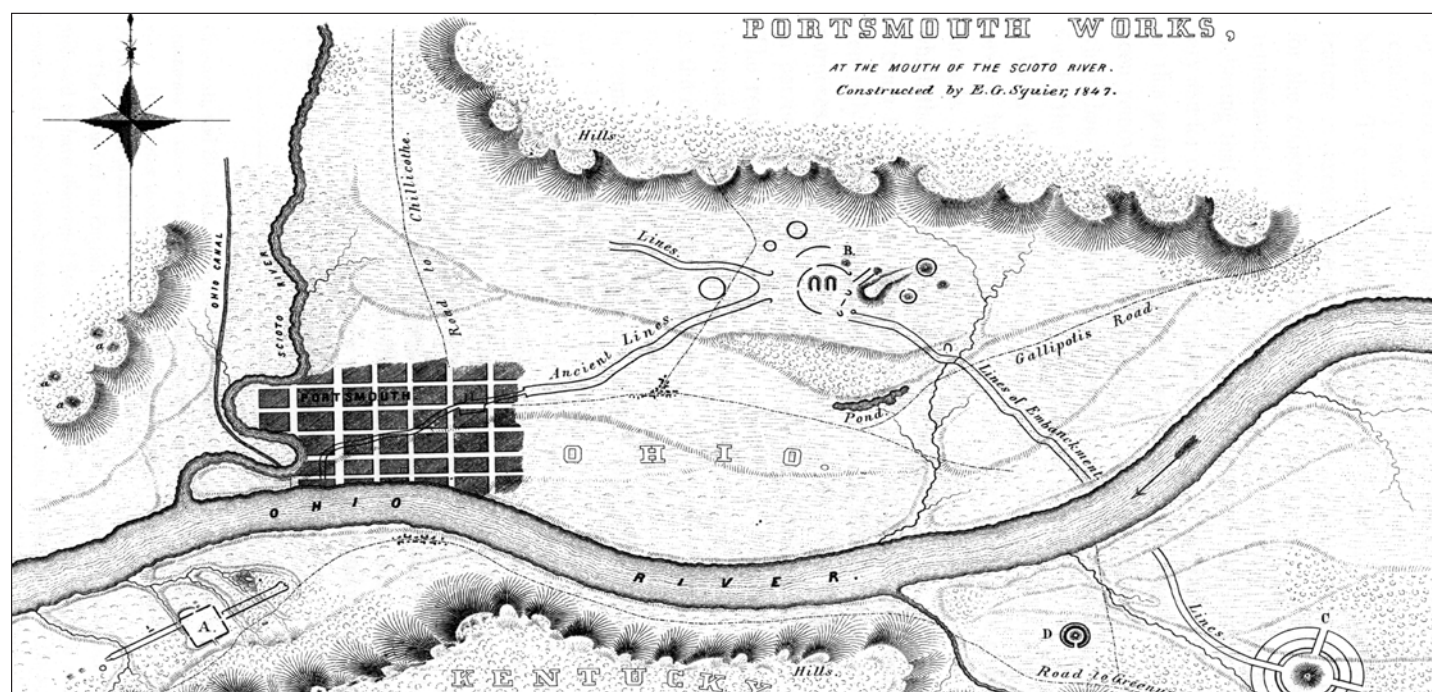
The Tremper pipes are one of the greatest treasures left by these ancient people.

PORTSMOUTH

The city of Portsmouth occupies a spectacular setting, an understandable site for the elaborate earthworks now best depicted on the floodwall murals along the riverfront. This was also the site of a large Indian settlement at the time of European contact, called Lower Shawnee Town. Evidence from here suggests the continuous Native habitation and cultural practices from antiquity up until contact in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In Portsmouth, also visit the Southern Ohio Museum, (825 Gallia Street, 740-354-5629, www.somacc.com), with an extensive ancient and historic collections plus changing exhibits and performing arts. The ancient artifacts are presented in a voluminous yet compact display on a mezzanine level. In the adjacent downtown and Boneyfiddle historic districts are many shops and cafés, and along the riverfront don't miss the exceptional series of murals depicting the history of the town, starting with a beautiful sunrise over the earthworks at the far left.

The earthwork complex here once stretched for miles, across terraces on both sides of the Ohio River. Now only fragments remain. To reach the best preserved sections, in Horseshoe Mounds Park, go north out of downtown about one mile on US 23, then right on Kinney's Lane for ¾ mile, then south on Hutchins Avenue for 2 blocks.



The Squier and Davis map shows how the horseshoes (upper center) relate to the miles of earthworks in the overall complex.

Here in this park, a single, large, horseshoe-shaped earthwork opens to the south and hints at one of the region's most elaborate complexes. The 1848 drawing shows how, from these two encircled horseshoe-shapes, earthen lines extended in every direction, and even across the Ohio River. About ten miles of wide, walled roadways connected several remarkable features.

The complex extended over onto the Kentucky side, where the Biggs Mound survives today, ringed by its moat. Another mound, surrounded by multiple walls, was mapped, but never found by modern archaeologists. This is the most dramatic river confluence in the region, where the Ohio is joined by the Scioto from the north, flowing down through the Hopewell heartland. At this major crossroads, settlement seems to have been continuous: Early European traders found a thriving Shawnee Indian town here.

THE "OLD FORT" EARTHWORKS

Across the river in South Portsmouth, Kentucky, the Old Fort Earthworks have recently been preserved with help from the Archaeological Conservancy. On private land (permission is available, inquire locally), they lie about 1½ miles west of the Route 23 Ohio River bridge, down a narrow lane on the right. The beautiful square enclosure is well preserved among a handful of small houses, its ancient orientation perfectly diagonal to the cardinal points. Archaeologist Gwynn Henderson:

One thing I found interesting is that the square is oriented north-south, so that one of the points is totally north. The folks who built this earthwork were going to put it there, irrespective of what kind of topography was on that spot. They filled in ditches, and they cut away certain topographic features, to ensure that the square was oriented the way they wanted it to orient.

Processions to the square for ceremonies probably followed the wide passageways. Even centuries after the earthwork building culture faded, the square's interior remained clean – no debris from either settlements or workshops!

I think we might infer that the reason why there are not materials from subsequent peoples living right there is that they appreciated, understood, respected, feared, what had gone on. Or maybe there had been stories passed down through the generations, across the centuries, such that they knew sort of generally, what it had been used for, what its purpose was, the kinds of things that went on there, and so, out of respect for the folks who had been long ago, they didn't live there in a domestic situation.

Today the square is still impressive, preserved by caring landowners and the privately funded Archaeological Conservancy.

EATING & SLEEPING ALONG THE LOWER SCIOTO

Along the route from Chillicothe, the best place to eat is in the historic district in Waverly, where the newly re-opened Emmitt House (123 North Market Street, 740-941-1058) serves good food in an authentic old building.

For a meal in Portsmouth, try Ye Old Lantern (at 2nd and Court Streets 740-353-6638), especially the "bourbon-laced rib eye steak". Explore the other eateries and antique and specialty shops in the historic Boneyfiddle District, or in nearby downtown. For an overnight within easy walking distance, try The Captain's Quarters Bed and Breakfast (hosts Linda & Don Evans, 529 Sixth Street, Portsmouth, Ohio 45662, 740-354-6609), or there is one chain hotel right near the bridge. For detailed options, and information on Portsmouth's many festivals, contact the Portsmouth Scioto County Visitors Bureau (342 Second Street, 740-353-1116, www.ohiorivertourism.org).



This depiction of Ancient Portsmouth at sunrise begins the riverfront's historical mural series.



Well preserved walls of the Old Fort Earthworks, on the edge of South Portsmouth, Kentucky.



The Southern Ohio Museum presents its antiquities in huge sets of similar object types, revealing subtle variations.



Shops, cafés, a brewery, and historic storefronts line the Boneyfiddle district, near Portsmouth's riverfront.